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Forces cover sent to Betty Miller by Sgt. Bill Speakman VC, during Confrontation with Indonesia

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# Betty 'Dusty' Miller (1918-2003) and her correspondence with British Forces in Borneo

Tom Anderson

Those of us who collect Forces mail in Borneo are well acquainted with the numerous covers sent by active servicemen to Betty Miller in Rochester, New York. Betty, or 'Dusty' as she was known to her many friends, joined our Society in 1951 as Member no. 81 (Members Handbook, 1955). She was prolific in her correspondence with troops in Borneo during the Confrontation with Indonesia (1962-66), collecting covers sent from Forces Post Offices (FPOs) in Brunei, Labuan, Sarawak and Sabah. Indeed, her activities apparently led to a visit from two members of the authorities (the FBI?) who wanted to know how she knew so much about the whereabouts of military units, as well as the names and activities of individual soldiers. They duly departed some time later, satisfied that she was only an eccentric woman interested in collecting stamps! (Batty-Smith, 2007)

In this article, I investigate Betty's philatelic interests throughout her life, focusing in particular on her Confrontation covers and the associated correspondence with Forces personnel in Borneo.

An excellent biography of Betty was written by Ada Prill (2018) in *Hinges & Tongs*, which is the journal of the Rochester Philatelic Association (RPA), New York. By means of introduction, I provide a brief biography of Betty based on both this article and direct correspondence with Ada. Betty Victoria Miller was born on November 18, 1918 in Yorkshire, England where she was brought up as the third of four children in a coal mining family. Thereafter, she took part in World War II from 1939, serving in the WRAF (Women's Royal Air Force; Figure 1). Women undertook many roles including clerks, cooks, welders and machinists, drivers, etc. It would appear, however, that Betty was an officer, a Flight Sergeant no less, based on a letter to her from Cpl Rackham (cover #29 in Appendix) who writes: "You tell me that you were a F/sgt in the W.R.A.F. during the War. You certainly surprised me with that ...". Officers in the WRAF did not undertake leadership roles as in rank and command but nevertheless carried out important duties in terms of ensuring discipline, maintaining morale and looking after the welfare of the women. In some cases, they were assigned to specific areas such as technical work on codes and cyphers (Escott, 1989).

Betty moved to the United States after the war, adopting America as her home but never forgetting her native England. For example, she

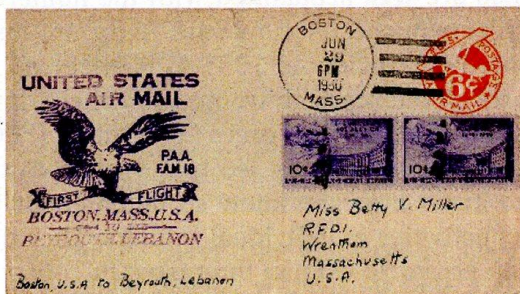


Figure 1: Betty in RAF attire, circa 1939

celebrated the 4<sup>th</sup> of July (American Independence Day) by wearing Union Jack socks with British flags all over them! (Koch, 2003) Her first job was in Massachusetts, where she stayed for several years caring for an elderly woman. The earliest Betty Miller cover that I have seen dates to this period (Figure 2), addressed to her at R.F.D.1, Wrentham, Massachusetts. RFD denotes Rural Free Delivery, route number 1. The cover attractively commemorates the first flight from Boston to Beyrouth (Beirut) by Pan American Airways, F.A.M. 18 (Foreign Air Mail) American Air Mail Catalogue number F18-146 with cachet type F18ad (American Air Mail Catalogue, 2003), cancelled Boston JUN 29 1950 and Beyrouth RP, 1 VII 50 on the verso. First flight covers were handled by the Post Office Department as a courtesy, providing the correct outward-bound postage was paid (25c in this case). Betty self-addressed this cover, which was then handled by the outgoing Postmaster, in this case Boston, with a request that it was flown on the



inaugural flight. The cachet was applied for free, supplied to the Post Office by the airline involved (Pan Am). There was no fee for return of the cover to the addressee, which was usually by regular surface mail.



**Figure 2:** First flight cover, Boston to Beirut, 29 JUN 1950.

Betty relocated to East Rochester (State of New York) in the mid-1950s, taking a job in the public library where she would remain until she retired. She lived in a tiny apartment above the library where she always had an ample supply of lemon tarts! (Koch, 2003) She was quite a character, with a great sense of humour and an endless capacity for friendship with nearly anyone who had the good fortune to meet her. Having never married, Betty pursued many pastimes including cycling (she often returned to her beloved Yorkshire), reading, photography, watching ice hockey and, of course, philately. She travelled widely to places such as Alaska, Fiji, New Zealand and the Panama Canal.

Betty was a member of many philatelic societies including the Rochester Philatelic Association, the Empire State Postal History Society, the American Philatelic Society, the Postmark Collectors Club, the American First Day Cover Society, the Art Cover Exchange, the Western New York Postal Card Club, the South African Collectors' Society, the Sarawak Specialists' Society and very probably a good few others. She had many collecting interests including British small-town postmarks and slogan cancels, First Day usages of U.S. stamps showing women aviators, airmail franked with U.S. transport airmail stamps (during the war), Alaska, Oman, bicycle advertising covers and, by no means least, Forces mail. Her collections were well organised and always beautifully mounted and captioned.

Betty continued collecting throughout her life – an example of a modern favour-cancelled

Betty V. Miller  
104 West 147 St.  
East Rochester, N.Y.  
14445-1816

14445+1816

**Figure 3:** Favour-cancelled cover from North Pole, Alaska.

cover from her collection is shown in Figure 3. It was sent from North Pole which is actually a small city situated in Alaska at a latitude of 65°N, near Fairbanks. The routine was to place the envelope, which was stamped and self-addressed (in her handwriting), inside a bigger envelope which was sent to the appropriate postmaster address in North Pole. The inner envelope would be duly favour cancelled and returned in the ordinary mail. The barcode (POSTNET) was applied when it reached a postal sorting centre, likely Fairbanks in this instance. North Pole is a popular choice for mail of this kind because parents can have letters returned to their children at Christmas time, with enclosed letters from Santa.

Betty's interest in Borneo started well before the onset of the Confrontation. Several at-



**Figure 4:** Cover sent from Lubok Antu in 1952, travelling via Engkilili and Simanggang.



tractive covers dating to the 1950s have come to my attention, sent to her from various far-flung places in Sarawak. My favourite is a cover (Figure 4) sent from Lubok Antu which was then a village, situated two miles from the border with Indonesia (Anak Angkat Sarawak, 1951). The cover is

cancelled LUBOK ANTU 14 FE 52 and travelled down-river on its way to Kuching, receiving transit cancels on the verso at neighbouring Engkilili (18 Feb) and the district capital Simanggang (19 Feb). Lubok Antu means the haunted depths of a river and derives its name from a deep pool where it is believed that unwary bathers could be pulled to the bottom by supernatural powers (Chang Pat Foh, 1999).

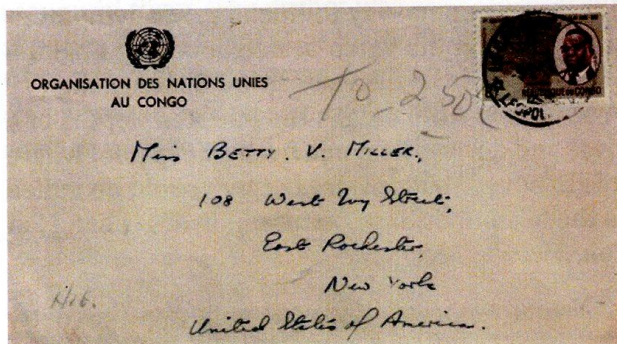
Four more Sarawak covers sent to Betty during this era are shown in Figure 5. In common with the cover described above, the first three are addressed in the same handwriting. Perhaps the sender was someone whom Betty knew from her RAF days and who travelled to Borneo to work in the colonial service. The fourth is addressed in Betty's own hand and has been re-addressed on its return to the USA (to 108 West Ivy Street, East Rochester), indicating that it was in this year (1956) that she relocated. I have also seen a cover sent OHMS from the postmaster at Lutong, dated 21 SP 59. In the accompanying letter, he writes: "Dear Madam, I have the honour to refer to your letter dated 30.8.1959 enclosing one International Reply Coupon together with a self addressed envelope for postmarks. It is greatly regretted that I am unable to comply with your requests as I am expressly forbidden to act in any way as agents for stamp dealers or collectors." The coupon was duly returned.

Forces mail was, I suggest, Betty's favourite philatelic pursuit. Her Borneo collection was preceded by a major interest in United Nations Forces, both in Egypt where the U.N. supervised the cessation of hostilities in the Suez Canal Zone (1956-67), and in the Congo where the mission was to restore stability following independence (1960-64). Writing in *The Holy Land Philatelist* in 1959, Betty remarks that she has five volumes of covers relating to United Nations Emergency Forces (UNEF), with another three hundred covers waiting to be sorted! (Miller, 1959) Most covers were obtained directly from Forces personnel or "in trade", although she also purchased the occasional cover from dealers (Miller, 1960). A fine example of a UNEF cover from Betty's collection is shown in Figure 6, namely an official ONUC (Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo) envelope sent to her in the civilian mail from Leopoldville (renamed Kinshasa in 1966) in the Congo, 9 FE 62 (Marriner, 2014). The sender was Major



**Figure 5.** Covers from Sarawak: A) SibU 30 OC 50, B) Bau 21 FE 51, C) Saratok 16 AP 52 (previously shown in Ngu, 2017), D) Simunjan 17 NO 56.

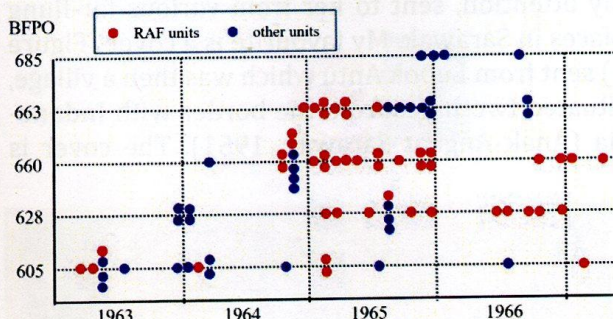




**Figure 6.** Letter from United Nations Forces sent from Leopoldville (Congo), 9 FE 62 (Marriner, 2014)

Dick Lawson who was based at the Luluabourg HQ, on secondment to the Nigerian Army from the 1st Royal Tank Regiment. He would later become Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in Northern Europe. Writing to Betty, Major Lawson thanks her for her letter and the offer of magazines, while complaining that the local shops were permanently closed and that any newspapers to be had were weeks out of date.

Betty was an authority on UN Forces mail and wrote at length about mail from battalions originating from various of the countries involved including Ghana, Sweden, Canada, Morocco and Yugoslavia (Miller and McBride, 1960). It was particularly difficult to establish contact with the Yugoslav battalion: "I have written many letters over three years, and with the exception of the commanding officer and the public relations officer my efforts have been wasted". Significantly, Betty tells us (in the same article) how she went about amassing her collection, corresponding with the troops. Ever resourceful, she tried various methods: "In 1957 I mailed three international reply paid postal cards to the battalion postmaster ..."; "I have from time to time persuaded my UNEF friends to send me unused UNEF airletters; these I have addressed to myself and sent out to the [Yugoslav] battalion to be returned to me ..."; "Last Christmas, 1959, I sent a greetings card to the commanding officer of the [Brazil] battalion and received a card in exchange". It would seem that Betty had friends in high places as "my first UNEF airletter from the Brazil battalion reached me by way of the diplomatic pouch"! In her writing, Betty provides a



**Figure 7:** Timeline, by month, of covers sent to Betty Miller, separating the BFPOs: 605 (Brunei), 628 (Kuching), 660 (Labuan), 663 (Jesselton) and 685 (Sibu). Mail from RAF units in red.

wealth of information on the various Field Post Offices (FPOs), postmarks, cachets, etc.

The Brunei Rebellion started in December 1962 and, along with the Confrontation with Indonesia that followed, provided Betty with the perfect opportunity to collect Forces mail from Borneo. In order to investigate the correspondence that followed, I constructed a listing of covers sent to her, working from a database provided by Bill Batty-Smith and other covers that I have seen, including those presented by members at the recent SSS meeting at Appleby

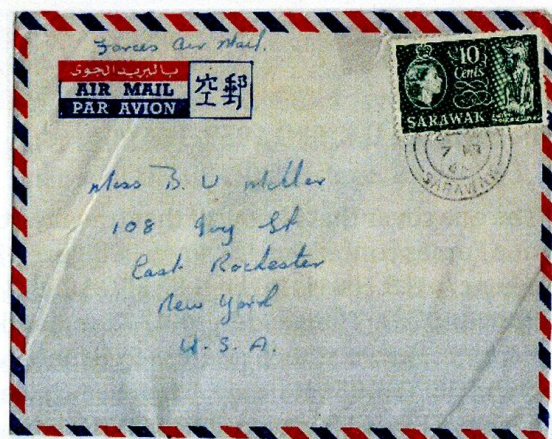


**Figure 8:** Outgoing cover which reached the Royal Ulster Rifles in Kuching (FPO 136) via the GPO in London.



Magna (Appendix 1). The resulting timeline of Betty's correspondence is presented graphically in Figure 7 showing how she went through various phases associated with different territories (with associated BFPO numbers). Many of the covers were sent by servicemen in the RAF, which is unsurprising given Betty's previous service with the WRAF.

The only outgoing cover (sent by Betty) that I have seen is addressed to BFPO 628 (Kuching), via the G.P.O. in Mount Pleasant, London (Figure 8). It was received in Kuching by the Royal Ulster Rifles on 23 Jan 1965 (obtaining an FPO 136 cancel), tying in neatly with the BFPO 628 timeline shown in Figure 7. The American stamps have unfortunately been torn away. Betty's initial forays would, in most instances, have likely involved sending mail via the staff in Mount Pleasant, who knew the precise location of army units and associated BFPOs, and would forward it accordingly. The postal clerk would distribute the mail on arrival, setting up future exchanges in which Betty was able to correspond directly with individual servicemen. Betty was resourceful and clearly had knowledge of which units were serving in Borneo, possibly aided by contacts from her WRAF days, as well as any printed information she could lay her hands on. She did not ordinarily have contact information for individual soldiers, at least in the first instance, although one exception is provided by Cpl P. Snook of 103 Sqn, RAF Kuching (cover #52), who writes: "I was quite surprised to find that you received the Royal Air Force News from which you found my name and address".



**Figure 9:** Early confrontation cover from Sarawak, sent civilian mail 7 MR 63.

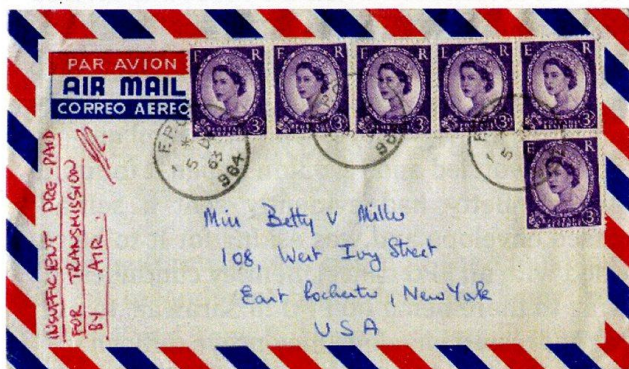
The earliest Confrontation cover from Betty's collection, at least that I have seen, is shown in Figure 9 (cover #1). It was sent in the civilian mail, 7 MR 63, presumably from Kuching (cancel unclear; the return address is "c/o GPO Kuching"). The use of civilian mail was necessary early in the Confrontation because Field Post Offices were not established when the first units arrived in Sarawak. The cover was sent by Gnr C.J.D. Bentley of the 12<sup>th</sup> (Minden) Bty, Royal Artillery, who was acting as the mail clerk. He writes: "When your letter arrived addressed to the mail orderly it got me worried and I wouldn't open it for quite a while". Betty had evidently sent a self-addressed envelope and was asking for it to be returned with an FPO cancel. Bentley continues: "... Owing to there being no FPO in Sarawak, to post your addressed envelope may prove difficult".

Betty's aim was to collect as many different FPO cancels as possible and the troops duly obliged. For example, Sgt M. McGregor writes (cover #54): "How is your collection of BFPO numbers coming along. One of my reasons for writing from here is that it has a different number from my own camp" and, likewise, L/Cpl R.E. Pomroy (cover #18): "As the Forces Post Office here has a different number from the one in Kuching I thought you might like the different franking stamp." Servicemen would take opportunities to post mail from distant locations when venturing from base, or by handing mail to their fellow soldiers who could act as couriers in this regard.

Betty was evidently sending ready-made envelopes that were addressed in her own handwriting. For example, C Sgt A.K. Dewan writes (cover #16): "I am sending the letter enclosed in the envelope you sent, through our post office" and (the same soldier; cover #17): "I am currently mailing the envelope as requested by you". Did she also affix stamps to the envelopes, as in the North Pole cover? I think not, although it may be that Betty supplied GB stamps for the soldiers to use. Many of the covers sent to Betty travelled at 2/6 postage, although there is considerable variation from 6d upwards. It is beyond the scope of this article to present a thorough analysis, suffice to say that, although many covers paid the correct rate (or more), a significant minority may have been underpaid to the USA. Betty was not entitled to the Forces concession rates of 3d until May



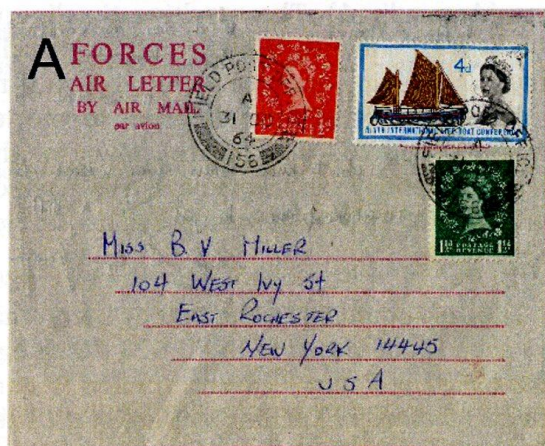
1965 and 4d thereafter and, with one exception (below), I have not seen covers travelling at these rates. If Betty had been affixing stamps, greater consistency would be expected. Unlike other collectors who were asking for concocted covers such as with insufficient postage to obtain postage due markings, Betty appears to have made no



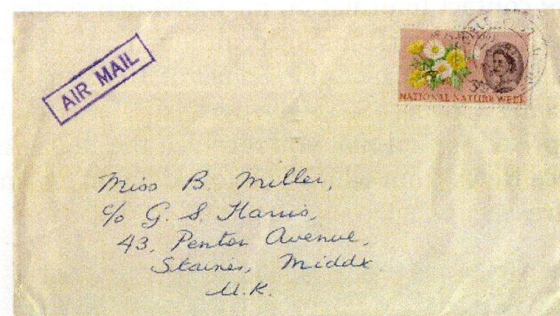
**Figure 10:** Insufficiently paid cover, sent from FPO 964 (Sibu), 5 DE 63.

such requests and any errors in postage were down to the troops themselves. The postal clerk may not have checked the post bag for stamps already applied or, on finding an incorrect rate, may simply have let it go. I have seen only one cover that is marked insufficiently paid, although no tax was paid (Figure 10; cover #9). It was sent at 1/6 by Lt P.R. Druffel of the 2<sup>nd</sup> KEO Gurkha Rifles (FPO 964, 5 DE 63).

Attractive commemorative stamps were used on many covers. The two shown in Figure 11 give further clues to indicate that the stamps were selected and affixed by the servicemen, although at least sometimes supplied by Betty. The first (Figure 11A; cover #21) is a Forces air latter travelling at the 6d rate, sent FPO 156, 31 OC 64 by Cpl. R. Jones who writes: "I see that you bought the life boat stamp in Southampton". The second cover (Figure 11B; cover #76) was sent from FPO 450 (Tawau), 20 SP 66, and is adorned with several beautiful stamps, including 4d, 6d and 1/3 stamps of the British Technology issue showing images of Jodrell Bank, motor cars and a hovercraft, respectively. In this case, it is improbable that Betty supplied the stamps because they were issued on 19 September 1966, just one day before the cover was sent.



**Figure 11:** Two attractive covers: A) FPO 156, 31 OC 64, B) FPO 450, 20 SP 66.



**Figure 12:** Cover to Betty sent c/o G.S. Harris in the U.K, FPO 1059, 16 JY 66.

The one cover that I know of that travelled to Betty at a Forces concession is shown in Figure 12, sent to her c/o G.S. Harris in the U.K., FPO 1059, 16 JY 66 (cover #73). The sender, of 42 Commando Royal Marines, lists a return address in Brunei on the verso: BFPO 605. He may have been away from base as FPO 1059 is placed firmly in Kuching at the time (Batty-Smith, 2007). As it happens, the 3d rate was a penny short in 1966, once again illustrating that postage rates were not strictly



enforced during the Confrontation. George Harris was an early member of our Society (membership no. 20) who was particularly interested in the history of the Rajahs and the story behind the early stamps of Sarawak (Shipman, 1952). Notably, he wrote a comprehensive article on the flaws of the 8c Royal Silver Wedding stamp of 1948 (Harris, 1950). Can anyone shed more light on this most interesting cover?

How was it that the troops were apparently so willing to exchange letters with Betty? For starters, she offered inducements. As noted by Gdsm Lord (cover #60), "A lot of the boys collect stamps out here", and Betty duly obliged. For example, Cpl P. Conlon writes (cover #11): "Thank you very much for the stamps, don't worry about hot soaking the paper off, as that is part of the hobby. ...". More significantly, many letters relay thanks to Betty for sending out a variety of magazines, evidently of the troops' choosing. A notable example is provided by Flt Lt C.W. Mader-son who writes (cover #3): "I have today received a copy of Saturday Evening Post and the Playboy Magazine [!] from you. I have made the magazines available to the Royal Air Force personnel on the

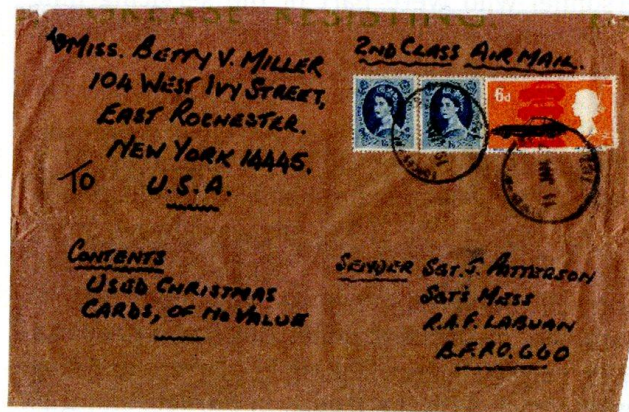
The route via Mount Pleasant in London was presumably more reliable. The troops could not do without their magazines and one of them, Cpl Terry, provides a c/o address in Aldershot and asks that the magazines should be sent there to ensure safe delivery (cover #76).

Betty also engaged the troops by writing lovely long letters and, once correspondence was underway, she would usually keep it going as long as possible (Ada Prill, pers. comm.). She took a genuine interest in the soldiers' way of life with discussion of topics including tropical down-pours, mosquitoes, cooking, holiday plans, etc. She also provided words of encouragement by asking about units and medals, mentioning her time in the WRAF by way of lead in. In one of Betty's letters, she writes: "...that some-one, sometime, will have to kick Sukarno in the teeth and you guess the British are selected for the job" (quoted in letter from Cpl P. Snook; cover #52). The banter diverged to all manner of topics and, in some case, the troops may have imagined (unrealistically) that Betty was a Forces sweetheart whom they might meet up with one day, especially as she was "Miss" Miller. For example, Ken Dyker of the 1st Battalion Queen's Own Highlanders writes to Betty saying (cover #8): "I am buying a considerable amount of land in the Bahamas, on which I am going to build a house ... Don't worry, I will invite you down for a holiday ... I hope you will accept my invitation"! Cpl Allen of RAF Labuan writes (cover #37): "I shall have to look out all my winter underwear before I come Stateside [to the U.S.A.]. Do you recommend Red Flannel? Or fur lined?".



**Figure 13:** Early Confrontation cover from Bru-  
nei, sent OHMS, 30c postage, 23 APR 63.

Unit, and I would like to thank you for your very generous and thoughtful action." The associated cover is interesting in that it travelled OHMS in the civilian mail, using 2x15c stamps (Figure 13). The magazines were evidently sent separately to Betty's letters. L/Cpl R.E. Pomroy writes (cover #18): "Both your letter and the magazines arrived on the same day mainly because you sent my letter via England instead of direct to Sarawak."



**Figure 14:** Piece from parcel, FPO 188, 19 JAN 67



I have already described perhaps the most interesting cover of all, sent from Sgt Bill Speakman VC, as the Cover article in this issue of the *Sarawak Journal*. My last example from Betty's collection is a magnificent piece from a parcel sent by Sgt J. Patterson from RAF Labuan, 19 JAN 67 (Figure 14; #81). The parcel, which is mentioned by Walker (1973), contained Christmas cards from the troops and exhibits the rare FPO 188 cancel which is a Cave Type 4 (Cave, 1974), designed for use on parcels and small packets. This example of FPO 188, which was serviced by BFPO 660, is one of only two recorded, both from RAF



**Figure 15:** Betty (on right) celebrating her birthday with that of her friend, Audrey Pankratz, in 1986 (their birthdays were only two days apart).

personnel who were part of the servicing unit which remained in Labuan after Confrontation ceased (Batty-Smith, pers. comm).

Betty Miller (Figure 15) passed away peacefully on 2 November 2003, having suffered a stroke a few weeks beforehand. "Intrepid, feisty, funny Dusty" (Koch, 2003), she was always brimming with enthusiasm and lived life to the full (Ada Prill, pers. comm.). Most of us in our Society never had the pleasure of meeting her, but we can nevertheless enjoy collecting her covers and correspondence with the troops in Borneo, and it is hoped that more interesting examples will come to light in future.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank many people who helped me in writing this article, both with information and advice, and in letting me show items from their collections: Ada Prill, Bernard Lardner, Bill Batty-Smith, Simon Martin-Redman, Chan Kee Tex, Francis Ngu, Roger Johnson, Liau Fah Onn, Melanie Swallow, Gerald Marriner and Stephen Reinhard.

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